



# Ahimsā

Newsletter of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

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## Going for Refuge to The Three Jewels

The spread of Buddhism in the modern world can only come about if it is faithful to the spirit and intention of the Buddha's own teaching. At the same time, it needs to find new ways of expressing the Dharma that are relevant to people today, without denying the rich variety of traditions and cultures of the Buddhist past. To carry this message of the Dharma out into the world, a nucleus of men and women is required, forming a new kind of Sangha, especially of effective Dharma teachers and leaders, firmly based upon deep personal practice.

The starting point for the successful spread of Buddhism is a renewal of our understanding and expression of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha (the "Three Jewels") and of our going for Refuge to them.

The central and definitive act of the Buddhist life is going for Refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. All Buddhists, would acknowledge that it is by reciting the formula of going for Refuge that one becomes a Buddhist, and most will regularly chant it, together with one or other list of precepts, as a centerpiece of their devotional ceremonies. It is thus what, most fundamentally, we have in common as Buddhists and what distinguishes us from non-Buddhists.

But going for Refuge is not merely a ceremonial recitation: it defines and expresses what it is to be a Buddhist. When we go for Refuge to the Three Jewels, we express our confidence in them and our reliance upon them as the ultimate sources of happiness and fulfillment — and we implicitly reject all other sources of confidence and reliance, whether from the world of the senses or from other views. We are not only confident in the Three Jewels, our whole Dharma life unfolds on the basis of that confidence. We go

for Refuge to them: we actively move in the direction they imply. Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels is an action, and it is repeated again and again until Enlightenment is achieved.

Typically, initially, our commitment to the Three Jewels is only partial — whatever we may chant in the Dharma-hall, much of the time we look to other sources of security: people, material goods, worldly situations and status, and various unquestioned views and beliefs. As we progress on the Path, our going for Refuge will move through a number of stages until it becomes complete. To begin with, our going for Refuge may simply be the expression of cultural values — a positive influence upon us but with little depth of personal reflection or commitment. At some point, we may catch a glimpse of the Dharma and make a temporary or provisional commitment. In time, that may become effective, as we reorganize our lives around our commitment to the Three Jewels, so that we do make consistent progress on the Path. As we go for Refuge more and more deeply, our confidence in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha becomes unshakeable, and we enter the

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## Activities

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship:

- Conducts informal seminars on Buddhism.
- Prepares and distributes free educational material.

## Programs

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship sponsors the following programs:

- Instructions in meditation.
- *Dhamma* study groups.
- Retreats (at IMC-USA).

There are no fees for any of the activities or programs offered by the organization. Seminars are designed to present basic information about Buddhism to the general public — anyone may attend. However, study groups and meditation instructions are open to members only.

Retreats last ten days and are coordinated through IMC-USA in Westminster, MD (410-346-7889). Fees are set by IMC-USA. Advance registration is required.

One-on-one discussions about one's individual practice or about Buddhism in general are also available upon request. These discussions are accorded confidential treatment. There is no fee for one-on-one discussions. ■

## Purpose of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship is an educational organization whose purpose is to preserve and promote the original teachings of the Buddha in the West.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship actively encourages an ever-deepening process of commitment among Westerners to live a Buddhist way of life in accordance with the original Teachings of the Buddha.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship provides free educational material to those who want to learn about Buddhism and about how to put the Teachings of the Buddha into practice.

The goals of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship are:

1. To provide systematic instruction in the *Dhamma*, based primarily on Pāli sources.
2. To promote practice of the *Dhamma* in daily life.
3. To provide guidance on matters relating to the *Dhamma*, its study, and its practice.
4. To encourage the study of the Pāli language and literature.
5. To maintain close contact with individuals and groups interested in promoting and supporting the foregoing goals. ■

## Dhamma Study Groups

The current Sunday morning meeting schedule is as follows:

- 9:00 AM: Basic/Introductory study group focusing on *The Essential Teachings of Buddhism*.
- 10:00 AM: Meditation sitting.
- 11:00 AM: Intermediate study group focusing on *Just Seeing* by Cynthia Thatcher.

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stream of the Dharma, from which we cannot fall away. This is true going for Refuge and, from that moment on, our progress is assured, until we ourselves become the Refuge: our going for Refuge then being absolute.

Going for Refuge is thus repeated again and again at every moment of our lives, carrying us through all the stages of the Path. It is this active trust, commitment, and effort that makes up the Buddhist way of life and is the starting point for meaningful spiritual transformation. ■

## Going for Refuge to The Buddha

Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels begins with going for Refuge to the Buddha. But who is the Buddha? Which Buddha do we go for Refuge to?

All Buddhists honor the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, but the various schools and traditions understand His role in diverse ways and assign Him different positions. In large areas of the Buddhist world, Shakyamuni Buddha is given a place that is more or less secondary to other figures. For instance, in much of Far Eastern Buddhism, the Buddha Amitābha has the pre-eminent position, while Tibetans will usually give prime honor to the founders of their own schools, who are also considered to have been Buddhas in their own right, and will also worship a rich pantheon of archetypal or visionary Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. These figures have great spiritual relevance within those traditions, and it is important that their worship and contemplation is respected, since they, too, are embodiments of the essence of Enlightenment. However, they can be better understood and appreciated if they are carefully placed in relation to the Buddha Shakyamuni in a way that reveals His full historical significance. Since the entire tradition emerges from His Enlightenment, we can most truly comprehend His teaching, and thereby discern our unity as Buddhists, when we see Him as central. In addition, when we focus on the Buddha Shakyamuni, we make the Dharma more

accessible to those who have had no previous contact with Buddhism by setting it within its historical context and demonstrating its relevance to them as human beings.

The Buddha Shakyamuni is the fountainhead of Buddhism. He rediscovered the Path and proclaimed it in this era. It is because of Him that we know of the depths of Enlightenment represented by the visionary Buddhas and Bodhisattvas revealed in the Mahāyāna sūtras and in the tāntras — for they are expressions, on the level of uplifted imagination, of the spiritual wealth of the Enlightenment that He discovered. They themselves, therefore, find their significance through Him. Indeed, the danger is that, without the historical context of Shakyamuni's Enlightenment, they come to be seen as mere god-figures, available for the magical manipulation of worldly life. This is all too commonly the case in traditional Buddhism today.

It is similarly important that the great gurus who founded particular schools are seen in a proper relationship to Shakyamuni. Such pre-eminent teachers have made tremendous contributions to the tradition and are worthy of being honored very highly indeed and their teachings studied very carefully. They are all, however, disciples of the Buddha Himself and their particular presentations of the Dharma are explanations, explorations, or expansions of what He taught. Recognizing this enables us to locate their teachings in the context of what the Buddha Himself had to say and prevents us from losing the unity of the tradition through basing ourselves on relatively late approaches to the Dharma that are specific to certain historical and doctrinal circumstances.

Thus, a proper understanding of Buddhism must start with the Buddha Shakyamuni Himself and His fundamental teachings, before the doctrinal developments that are so prominent in the later schools. The starting point must be as near as we can get to the Buddha Himself and to what it seems almost certain that He did teach, found in the core of very early scriptures, preserved principally in the scriptures of the Pāli Canon. This does not at all deny the value of later material but, insofar as it is later, it is a development on that core of the Buddha's own teaching and can only be fully understood, judged,

and appreciated from that standpoint.

The Buddha to whom we go for Refuge is, in the first place, the founder of our traditions: the human, historical Shakyamuni. Seeing Him as the primary object of Refuge allows us to make sense of developments that have taken place since His time; it enables us to appreciate the significance of the supra-historical, visionary figures that have emerged as expressions of the inner qualities of the Enlightenment He rediscovered; and it communicates clearly the inspiring potential that all human beings have. What is distinctive about Buddhism is that it offers us a vision of the highest possibilities that are open to humanity. The Buddha started as a human being, like us, and what He did, we can do. ■

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## Going for Refuge to The Dharma

The Dharma is the way things truly are, beyond all ordinary understanding, and it is by realizing the Dharma directly for Himself that Gautama became the Buddha Shakyamuni. Having achieved Liberation, the Buddha passed the remainder of His life communicating to others His fundamental insight into the nature of reality and teaching the Path that would lead them to share it. The Dharma is, thus, also the body of teachings, practices, and institutions that constitute that Path to Enlightenment, based originally on the Buddha's own words.

On this much, all Buddhists can presumably, in essence, agree. But many different expressions of the Dharma have developed over the millennia, some of them, it would seem, mutually contradictory. This wealth, vast and various as it is both in its geographical breadth and its historical depth, is becoming available to us now as it has been to no Buddhists ever before. Modern Buddhists are, then, faced with the task of evaluating two thousand five hundred years of Buddhist development across much of Asia. We must distinguish what is true to the Dharma in that development from what is distorted or merely adventitious. We cannot accept uncritically everything that carries the label, "Buddhist", from

no matter what period or place, because there is so much that is incidental or erroneous. Yet, we should not reject all but that which belongs to one particular school — no contemporary school can be accepted as an absolutely "pure tradition", unchanged since the time of the Buddha, no matter what its adherents might claim.

### Valuing Modern Scholarship

Modern historical scholarship, which has contributed very significantly to our knowledge of how Buddhism spread and developed, offers a way forward. We can now gain some perspective, with growing accuracy, on how different schools came about in response to particular circumstances. We can view the Buddhist tradition itself as a conditioned phenomenon, subject to the laws of dependent arising — of change, decay, and renewal — as the Buddha taught that everything is.

Buddhism has nothing to be afraid of in this respect: while Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, for the most part, rest upon the alleged divine origins of their holy books, Buddhists can accept that, like all other things, the *Tripitaka* itself and the teachings it contains arose in dependence on conditions. We have access to far more accurate historical and philological information about the origins and nature of the Buddhist texts we have inherited than has been available since they were created. Even if this knowledge sometimes tends to undermine the traditional accounts of how the texts came about, it does not destroy their value as teachings about the goal and the Path. Once we have removed the veils of a shallow "sacredness", we can gain a better understanding of how and why we have got what now comes down to us and, therefore, can more easily assess its value to us now.

### Adaptation, Creative Unfolding, and Internal Renewal of the Tradition

When we look at the Buddhist tradition as a whole, from this point of view, we see three main processes at work. The Buddha communicated the Dharma at a particular point in time against the



background of particular cultural, economic, and political circumstances. While much that He said, as it has come down to us, requires no modification, He could not have spoken for all times and all places in the detail of His communication. The Buddha's successors have had to adapt to new circumstances, especially as they encountered new cultures outside India, and have had to evolve new and appropriate ways of expressing the essential truths of the Dharma. Faithfulness to the Dharma does not mean merely preserving and continuing the forms in which it was originally presented — which would, ironically, be a form of bad faith. The tradition also evolved in many different directions as fresh inspiration arose within it. Even the Buddha's own teaching could not exhaust the infinite possibilities of the Dharma. The greatest of the Buddha's heirs have unfolded more of the Dharma's riches from their own creative experience. New dimensions of the truth have been revealed, and more effective and uplifting ways of conveying it have developed. These new insights and expressions have helped to shape much of what we see in modern Buddhism.

Another process has also contributed to the rich variety of schools and traditions. Buddhism is not only in dialogue with the ever-changing world around it, it is also in dialogue with itself. There is an inevitable process of decay within the tradition, as power and status assert themselves, as misunderstandings become institutionalized, as one-sided emphases take on concrete form. These degenerations are also represented in the overall tradition as it comes down to us today. But so are the teachings that developed in order to correct them.

The Buddhist tradition, as a whole, preserves those traces of decay as well as the signs of correction and renewal.

### A Critical Ecumenism

On this basis, we may establish the criteria for the Dharma in the present age. We can take an ecumenical approach, open to the totality of Buddhist tradition — but ecumenism does not preclude intelligent discrimination: a critical

ecumenism is what is called for. What has come down to us has been subject to the processes of adaptation to new situations, of creative evolution, and of degeneration and renewal. We can find much that is of great value everywhere in this inheritance, but what is valuable to us is to be distinguished from what is merely incidental, contaminated with non-Buddhist ideas, or even degenerate. But what is the touchstone of value? Scholarly research can help us here too, because it enables us to discern with a reasonable degree of accuracy what are the earliest texts that are most likely to represent something extremely close to the Buddha's own words — although we can never be completely certain that we are encountering exactly the words He used or that we have an exhaustive account of what He said. These earliest texts contain all the basic teachings that are accepted by all schools and traditions. This, then, gives us a basis for evaluating whether or not later developments are authentic expressions of the Dharma: do they conform to or conflict with what the Buddha Himself taught, as represented by that earliest corpus of teachings? The issue here is not whether or not the teaching is *formally* the same as what the Buddha taught, but whether or not it conforms to it in principle.

However, this test is not enough. Simply because a later teaching or practice does not conflict with what the Buddha taught does not mean that it is useful. So much that is no longer spiritually efficacious might be preserved under that criterion. We need to see whether those later developments are really helpful now, as a means of communicating the Buddha's understanding. Considering the situation in the world today, we have no time to waste in simply preserving the past. We need a presentation of the Dharma that will really work now to change the lives of many people.

We can base our presentation of the Dharma firmly on the core teachings of the Buddha Himself and include whatever from any traditional source is found to be effective and in conformity with what we know the Buddha Himself taught. It may also include new ways of communicating the teachings that emerge from the present situation — so long, again, as they are in conformity with the principles contained in the Buddha's own words.

### Neither Eternalist nor Nihilist

The most important basic doctrinal criterion for evaluating teachings is the extent to which they conform to the Middle Way, taught by the Buddha as avoiding the extremes of eternalism and nihilism. His teaching represented a complete break with His Indian religious and intellectual background, which was one of intense metaphysical speculation. He Himself rigorously resisted all such theorizing beyond what was necessary to follow the Path and attain the Goal and fought a continuous battle against all kinds of speculative views, which He considered distracted from the task at hand or, even worse, led astray, ethically and spiritually. His teaching of dependent arising points to the observable characteristic shared by all things, rather than to an ultimate reality within which all takes place or which is their true meaning. He considered such “eternalist” views as leading easily to very negative ethical and spiritual consequences. He was not, however, a nihilist or materialist, which He saw as, if anything, more pernicious. He taught, from His own experience, that it is possible to follow a sequence of dependently arising states that leads to Liberation, the ultimate and most desirable good.

While no modern schools would deny the central importance of the Middle Way, especially as represented by the teaching of dependent arising, some of the ways in which the Dharma is discussed can stray towards one or other extreme. The trend seems to have started quite soon after the Buddha’s own Parinirvāṇa, with the attempt to systematize His teachings, which, in some cases, fell into a quasi-realism. As time went on, this trend became stronger and, in some later Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna sources, there is terminology that suggests eternal metaphysical entities, even if that is not what was originally intended. There has been an opposite trend in other schools towards presenting the Buddha’s teaching in such a one-sidedly negative fashion, effectively as the denial of all life and feeling, that it becomes deeply unappealing. Both this quasi-eternalism and quasi-nihilism lose the spirit of the Buddha’s own message. Whatever the intention or understanding of their exponents, they slip away

from the Middle Way.

The problem seems to have been that the full significance of dependent arising was not always appreciated. In many cases, even today, it is understood as referring simply to the chain of conditions that underlie our bondage in *samsāra*: the twelve-fold *nidāna* chain. The escape from *samsāra* is presented merely as the negation or undoing of these twelve links. Later traditions have tried to compensate for this somewhat bleak interpretation through metaphysical explorations that sometimes rely on terms that have an inescapably eternalist ring, if not understood correctly, whatever their original intention.

The whole Buddhist tradition emerges out of the Buddha’s own fundamental insight into the conditioned nature of all things. If this is understood and presented correctly, no more is required — indeed, “more” often leads inexorably in the direction of either eternalism or nihilism. Dependent arising includes both the cycles of *samsāra* and the spiraling progression of the Path that leads to *nirvāṇa*. *Nirvāṇa* arises as the expository end point of the sequence of dependently arising states that constitute the Path — it is the point at which language is finally defied, though it implies no stopping point. That sequence is dealt with in various ways in the Buddha’s own teaching: for instance, as the three trainings of *śīla*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā* — the Buddha’s main topic during His last teaching journey. Most importantly, the Buddha discusses twelve progressive *nidānas* that lead to Liberation in two *suttas* of the Pāli Canon that seem largely to have escaped notice (see especially the Upanisa Sutta, *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, XII.23). Later traditions have their own sequences of dependently arising progressions, such as the ten Bodhisattva *bhūmis* or the various stages detailed in Vajrayāna traditions, such as the Nine Yānas of the Nyingma — although these are not generally discussed in terms of dependent arising.

Dependent arising, then, does not merely characterize the chain that binds us to suffering. It includes also the Path by which we can escape from suffering. The total complex of conditioned processes includes two principal trends: a *Samsāric* and a *Nirvāṇic*. The *Nirvāṇic* trend is driven first of all by skillful *karma*. As we act

more and more skillfully, more and more refined and sensitive states of mind emerge, which support a greater recognition of the Truth. Once we see things as they really are at Stream-Entry, a Dharmic trend takes over — we enter a stream that carries us on to *nirvāṇa*. What happens beyond *nirvāṇa* is beyond our understanding, but it should not be conceived either in eternalist or nihilist terms.

All later teachings on the subject of the way things are can be tested against the Buddha's fundamental expression of His insight, the doctrine of dependent arising, seen in its fullness as encompassing both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.

### **A Balanced Approach to the Practice of the Dharma**

It is important that practice of the Dharma is balanced if it is to be relevant and effective in contemporary circumstances. Different schools within Buddhism have preserved different spiritual currents, many of which are significant for us today. Often, these take the form of emphases on one or other aspect of Dharma teaching or practice. In traditional contexts, these emphases have, at best, taken their place within a larger Buddhist culture that contained other balancing emphases. With the radical cultural shifts that have taken place worldwide in recent times, in which old patterns are being drastically eroded, traditional schools can be left with rather one-sided presentations. Some, for instance, emphasize study of the scriptures and commentaries at the expense of meditation, while others place so much importance on meditation that study is virtually excluded.

Others again give priority to ritual and ceremony, to following Vināya rules and precepts, or to practical work, often minimizing the importance of other aspects. Sometimes also, exclusive emphasis is given to one or other particular way of practicing or one technique, which is claimed as the true and correct one, whether taught by the Buddha or a later teacher.

No particular practice or technique is supreme or universal. Following the Path demands a total transformation of all aspects of the individual, and that requires a balanced approach that will include

a range of practices. In addition, at different stages of growth or under varying circumstances, the pattern of practice will probably need to change. What practices are engaged in by any individual will require constant monitoring to see that they are truly supporting development on the Path. One of the functions of Sangha is to ensure that each member is truly growing in the Dharma and growing in a balanced way.

One of the most important balances to be struck is that between personal transformation and altruistic activity. The Buddhist life is lived for the attainment of *bodhi*, which consists in the final transcendence of all ego-clinging. The first and most important stage in real spiritual evolution is Stream-Entry, when that ego-clinging is decisively broken. Once one lets go of that self-attachment, what is released is a stream of mental states that have less and less reference to self. In a phrase, what is unleashed once Insight is attained is selfless compassion. Striving for Enlightenment, then, must balance that quest for direct understanding of the unreal nature of the assumed metaphysical self with active giving up of self to the service of the Dharma and, thereby, of all life. A one-sided stress on one or the other will distort spiritual practice and thereby limit its success.

### **Restoring the Realm of the Imagination**

Modern Buddhists face another very challenging issue. Traditionally, Buddhists have accepted a rich and complex perspective on life, seeing existence as populated by incalculable numbers of sentient beings: beings such as animals and insects that occupy the same material world as us, as well as beings occupying other world-systems and other dimensions parallel to ours, sometimes overlapping with it.

Existence has traditionally been viewed as stratified into layers of worlds of increasing subtlety and beauty, each with its own laws of space and time. From the Buddha's own day on, the existence of these beings and dimensions has been accepted quite literally.

Such beings and realms are integral to the Dharma as traditionally expressed, but they are in direct conflict with the prevailing scientific world-view, which is predominantly materialist. What is

modern Buddhism to make of this conflict between the traditional world-view and the one that is widely current?

There is little doubt that quite a bit of Buddhist culture could usefully be subjected to critical enquiry. A great deal of credulity and superstition encrusts what has come down to us, and a demand for evidence, coupled with a critical examination of original sources, would clear away a great deal of this superstition.

While much of this sort of material is colorful and engaging, there is quite a lot that encourages credulity, and perpetuates superstition and ignorance, which can all too easily be exploited by powerful interests and often obstructs real social reform.

However, truth is not merely of the five physical senses. It is integral to the Dharma that worlds beyond the senses exist — although we need a new terminology to speak of these worlds and a deeper ontology to understand the nature of their existence.

A key task for contemporary Buddhists is to forge a terminology and ontology that finds a Middle Way between the superstition and ignorance so common in traditional Buddhism and the reductive materialism of popular scientism. The language of Imagination offers an immediate starting point for that process. Besides this philosophical task, there needs to be a renewed exploration of these dimensions from within our modern cultures. The primary means for such exploration is through the direct experience of meditation. However, an important and more widely accessible means is available to us through art.

### **The Significance of Art and Culture**

Buddhism has an exceptionally rich artistic and cultural history. We have inherited a vast wealth of sculpture, painting, architecture, ceremony and ritual, dance and drama, literature, and music and song. Much of this has been produced in very different times, using very different materials and techniques from those common today. It has also been produced in relative isolation. Today, Buddhist culture has been exposed to global

culture, meeting influences from many different places and times. It is especially encountering a mass culture that is backed by an almost irresistible commercial force. It is no longer possible to reproduce, unselfconsciously, the forms of the past, and yet it is not at all clear in what direction to look for a Buddhist cultural renewal.

Nonetheless, that quest for new and relevant cultural expressions of the Dharma is of foremost importance if Buddhism is to have a major impact on the world. A Buddhist way of life is not a matter of will and intellect alone. Emotion and, above all, imagination are to be engaged if one is successfully to move forward on the Path. Culture speaks the language of the heart and of the imagination, and, if it expresses Buddhist values, influences the whole of society and enables individuals to practice the Dharma far more effectively.

The development of a contemporary Buddhist cultural expression involves the following considerations:

- Recognizing the Dharmic significance of art and culture: Dharmic development naturally expresses itself in a deepening aesthetic sensibility;
- Accepting the potential of artistic creation as a means of Dharma practice, insofar as it reflects the exploration of deeper aspects of experience and leads to self-transcendence;
- Acknowledging the value of ancient Buddhist art and culture, as a source of inspiration, not merely of imitation;
- Appreciating the best of non-Buddhist culture: Great art expresses human values that transcend their context and touch those depths from which the Dharma comes. There are outstanding expressions of human aesthetic sensibility in many other religions, as well as in non-religious art. These can be valued as art, independent of their doctrinal or liturgical associations, and, thereby, as material for a Buddhist cultural renewal;
- Expressing the rich variety of human experience by embracing the best and most positive aspects of local culture and tradition, as long as it is compatible with the Dharma.



If these principles are applied in depth, we can look to the emergence of new Buddhist cultures all over the world, and a strong Buddhist influence on the wider culture. This development will make it possible for more and more people to engage deeply with the Dharma and to live happy and meaningful lives. ■

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## Going for Refuge to The Sangha

The Sangha *as a refuge* cannot be identified with any human institution or any particular school or tradition. The Sangha Refuge is a basis for complete confidence because it consists of all those men and women throughout the ages who have gained transcendental insight. Only they can be fully trusted as infallible sources of guidance and example, by virtue of their having seen the way things truly are. When we say, “I go to the Sangha for Refuge”, it is to the members of the Ārya Sangha, the Noble Ones — those who have attained Stream-Entry or beyond —, to whom we are committing ourselves. In going for Refuge to the Ārya Sangha, we are:

- Drawing on the guidance and example of its members;
- Deriving confidence that the Dharma is a true Path to Liberation because there are people who have trodden the Path and realized its goal;
- Gaining inspiration to create the kind of ideal and harmonious society the Sangha represents — a pattern for all human collective life.

All Buddhists today would probably share this understanding of the Sangha, at least theoretically. However, in some areas of the Buddhist world, the Sangha has come to be identified almost exclusively with the monastic Sangha, whether or not that is explicitly stated. Of course, renunciation is a very important aspect of the Buddhist way of life, and those who have gone forth into homelessness have opportunities for practicing the Dharma that householders will often not have. It should also be stressed that there are many excellent Monks and Nuns who practice the

Dharma wholeheartedly and do their best to spread it vigorously.

Nonetheless, an over-valuation of monasticism often distorts the Buddhist community to the detriment of all. Monks and Nuns may then be given honor and economic support regardless of their true worth as spiritual practitioners. As long as they wear the robe and do not obviously break the Vinaya (Disciplinary Rules), they are likely to be treated as exemplars. Unfortunately, however, quite a number do little to deserve the respect and *dāna* they receive and do not contribute much to the practice and spread of the Dharma.

The effect on lay people can be equally harmful. Many lay people have been taught that their only role in Buddhism is the support of the monastic Sangha. They believe that, by giving *dāna* (“alms, offerings”) to the Monks, they will gain merit, which will help them in this life and the next. This relieves them of responsibility for more intensive practice of the Dharma.

This “dependency economy” can then feed the worldly interests of both lay people and monastics, trapping them in a superstitious symbiosis that undermines Buddhist practice. Often, this system is tied up with outdated economic and social structures and is thus defenseless in the face of urbanization, industrialization, and the growing democratic spirit.

While there are many exceptions to this system, both among Monks and Nuns and among lay people, it is quite commonly true. This notion of Sangha is quite unfit for the task that Buddhism now faces.

## The Significance of Sangha

The Ārya Sangha is our Refuge, but we need Sangha in a more immediate and comprehensive sense. It is very difficult, indeed, to practice as Buddhists without a social context that is geared to the Dharma. We need companions on the Path, a wider Spiritual Community, who can encourage and support us at every stage.

Practicing the Dharma is not an easy endeavor, especially since it goes against conventional norms: most people consider that the important issues of life are simply survival, reproduction, and worldly success, and, often enough, they do

not strongly value ethical or spiritual principles — whatever ceremonies they may undertake or offerings they may give. There is seldom much sympathy, outside societies that preserve traditional Buddhist culture, for those who want to live a Buddhist way of life. If we are to make genuine progress on the Path, we need to be in deep connection with those who see things the same way that we do and who will, therefore, understand and assist our efforts.

Not only does Sangha give us moral support, it is itself one of the chief arenas for our practice. The purpose of Dharma practice is to go beyond our narrow self-attachment, which, according to the Buddha, is the source of all our suffering. We transcend self-attachment by cultivating loving-kindness and compassion, not merely in the meditation hall but in our daily lives. The Sangha, in the form of a wider circle of Dharma companions, offers us the best opportunity to learn to live and work closely with others in deep and loving harmony.

Moreover, a successful Sangha is an example to all of what the whole of society could be. This is very urgently needed in a consumer-oriented world in which there is an increasing erosion of collective life lived on the basis of shared values. People need to see actual examples of friendship and harmony in a context of high ideals and ethical living, so that they, too, can have the courage to lead better lives. Not only is a circle of like-minded practitioners a worthy example, from it comes guidance and teaching for those who themselves want to lead a Buddhist way of life.

It should also be said that if a Sangha is a genuine Sangha it will be a source of delight and happiness to all who participate in it. This is the kind of Sangha the world needs today.

### Spiritual Companionship

Sangha is a general principle that is put into effect especially through particular relationships between Sangha members. Traditionally, the Sangha relationship that has most often been stressed is that between teacher and disciple. Although the relationship with a teacher is a very important one, and many examples can be found of its great effectiveness, there is frequently a

strong emphasis on its formal aspects, involving little meaningful human contact. It can also be abused, too often being based upon power, rather than upon mutual respect, which from the social point of view, is the essence of the Dharma.

What needs to be stressed is *kalyāṇa-mitratā*, “spiritual friendship”, which signifies friendship in the Dharma: whether between more experienced and less so or between those of more or less equal experience. Teacher and pupil should be friends — the Dharma can only truly be taught and practiced in this context.

Friendship is a rich and highly desirable human experience that is made all the more precious by being practiced in the context of the Dharma. It has a number of components: shared values and ideals, deep sympathy and liking, mutual knowledge and understanding, cooperation and helping one another, and faithfulness. The quality that makes it possible is communication — which is more than the mere exchange of information: it is a mutual awareness and responsiveness, which can take one very far beyond self-attachment. Indeed, communication and friendship are among the most powerful Dharma methods we have — as well as being among the most important and delightful fruits of Dharma practice.

The experience of spiritual friendship and the development of communication are the basis for Sangha. Although organization is vitally important for the spreading of the Dharma, organization is secondary to friendship and Sangha. Organizations will only be effective if they are formed out of Sangha. The very active work that is needed to make the Dharma much more widely known in the modern world needs to be done on the basis of Sangha in a spirit of friendship.

### Spiritual Commitment

Throughout the Buddhist world, the principal distinction within the community is between monastics and householders. But this is not really the most important issue. The key question is the degree to which an individual goes for Refuge to the Three Jewels — to what extent they are genuinely committed to the Buddhist Path. We have already seen that going for Refuge to the

Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha is the central and definitive act of the Buddhist way of life. What makes you a Buddhist is that you actively practice the Dharma in harmony with others as disciples of the Buddha. A Buddhist is one who effectually treads the Path and is thereby making progress towards Enlightenment. This can be done whether or not one is wearing a robe, as is evidenced by the many lay disciples in the Buddha's own time who achieved transcendental attainment. Indeed, many who wear a robe make no effective effort on the Path at all, and many progress spiritually who have never worn a robe.

The Ārya Sangha apart, the Sangha that is most significant consists of all those who are putting their going for Refuge to the Three Jewels into practice, regardless of whether they are monastic or lay. A sincerely committed Monk has far more in common with a sincerely committed lay person than he does with his monastic brothers who are merely wearing the robe for the sake of the security and status it confers. An effective Sangha needs be based on commitment, not lifestyle.

### **Sangha United on the Basis of Commitment**

Commitment is the fundamental criterion for entry into the Sangha, not any other consideration, such as lifestyle, gender, nationality, education, race, or social class or caste. In the first place, this means that there can be no hierarchical distinction between monastics and lay people. All are equal members of a single Sangha, so long as they are genuinely and effectively committed to the Three Jewels, in the sense of systematically applying themselves to the practice of the Dharma. Thus, in the broader sense, "Sangha" does not merely mean the monastic Sangha, but the community of all those who go for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha to an effective degree.

This is especially significant as regards the place of women in the Sangha. The traditional Buddhist world generally assigns a lesser place to women: according to all Vinayas, the most senior Nun must defer to the most junior Monk. These traditions came from social and economic circumstances very different from our own, in which women are able to play a full and equal part in social, cultural, economic, and political life. A

modern-day Sangha should accept people simply on the basis of their commitment, not their gender, although there may well be situations where men and women wish to live or practice separately, for obvious practical reasons. No superiority, whether spiritually or organizationally, should attach to anyone simply because of their gender.

The Sangha transcends the categories of the world. Relationships within the Sangha are based on people's commitment, their moral and spiritual worth, not distinctions of nationality, gender, race, ethnic background, sexual orientation, economic or social status, age, or any other arbitrary characteristic. The ideal Sangha is one that crosses as many boundaries as possible, so that the status accorded by birth is broken down. For a modern Sangha, one of the most powerful practices is bringing people together from many different backgrounds and practicing the Dharma together simply as individuals who go for Refuge to the Three Jewels.

### **Sūtra-Style Monasticism**

While the Sangha should not accord special status to anyone simply on the basis of their lifestyle, nonetheless, renunciation is to be highly valued and supported: that is, the renunciative lifestyle is to be valued in itself, although the individuals who profess it can only be valued according to their own moral and spiritual worth, not the way of life they profess. Renunciation is essential to the Dharma life: in order to make progress on the Path, one renounces the world as much as possible, with all its enticements to attachment. It is very valuable, indeed, that some people choose to live without so many of the things that bind most of us into *saṃsāra*.

However, monasticism in the Buddhist world is in urgent need of renewal, dominated as it can be by formalism, compromise with authority, and concern with property and even wealth — and, at times, by outright hypocrisy. Because the following of sets of Vinaya rules, established in quite different historical circumstances, has become the key definer of monasticism, its underlying meaning and purpose is frequently lost. Becoming a Monk or Nun in reality means renouncing family and possessions so that one can

go for Refuge wholeheartedly and with as little distraction as possible. We need a new style of Buddhist monasticism, not based so much on a mechanical adherence to the Vinaya rules, but, rather, on the principles of the Buddha's own way of life, in accordance with modern circumstances.

We need what could be called “sūtra-style” monasticism, or to use another name, “anāgārika-style” monasticism — inspired by the way of life of the Buddha's companions as depicted in the early discourses. It is best to be cautious about legislating as to how “sūtra-style” practitioners should behave, because circumstances vary so much — and because legislation always offers the opportunity for keeping the letter while breaking the spirit, as is often the case with the following of the Vinaya rules. We can, however, discern five principles at work in the life of a successful renunciant in this sense:

1. Chastity: *brahmacharya* is the defining feature of monasticism, but it means more than mere abstention from sexual activity. It refers to a highly positive state of freedom from craving. Those leading a monastic life should not merely be chaste, but should be happily so. Too many Monks and Nuns either hypocritically compromise their vows in various ways or else are unhappily chaste, with all the psychological and behavioral consequences that repression can bring;
2. Fewness of possessions: the “sutra-style” practitioner limits what they own to what they immediately and genuinely need for their physical survival and the carrying out of their work for the Dharma;
3. Simplicity of lifestyle: this is especially important and especially difficult in the complex and busy modern environment. It essentially means eliminating from one's life whatever is unnecessary to Dharma practice, so that one is not wasting one's time on the business of accumulation and safeguarding of possessions or in activities that are distractions. Simplicity of lifestyle does not mean deprivation or degradation: a simple life should be healthy and full of uncomplicated, dignified, and inexpensive beauty — an “elegant simplicity”. It could also be said that

this principle, combined with the others, is “environmentally friendly”, for the sūtra-style practitioner has left the consumer-oriented system that is the primary cause of our current environmental crisis;

4. Careerlessness: One takes up the monastic life so that one may devote all of one's time and energy to the Dharma. One may, of course, need to take paid employment to earn enough to live on, but one's work is not an alternative focus for one's energies or a means of furthering worldly ambition. For those engaged in Buddhist activities, there is a special danger: they should take care not to make a career out of monastic life, channeling ambition into ecclesiastical advancement and power;
5. Community living: The Monk or Nun has renounced marriage and family but still needs friendship, emotional warmth, and intimacy. Such social support and engagement comes from those who share the same way of life, living together in residential spiritual communities. Without this kind of community, it is very difficult to maintain a celibate life, and one risks either abandoning it or maintaining it with some degree of emotional and instinctual repression.

Those who take the vow of *brahmacharya* do so in the context of the precepts that all Buddhists should try to follow. They take the vow as a special and more intense practice of the third precept of refraining from sexual misconduct that is common to all. It is important that this is born in mind. Every genuine Buddhist is practicing ethics, including in the area of sexual conduct. Indeed, every Buddhist also needs to live as much as they can by the other principles outlined above: fewness of possessions, simplicity of lifestyle, careerlessness, and, if not community living, then active participation in a Sangha in a context of deep friendship.

### Creating an Alternative Way of Life

The changed cultural, social, and economic circumstances of the modern world demand that Buddhists today develop new institutions for



living a Buddhist way of life. This is especially important because it is now clear that the way of life in economically developed countries — a way of life to which people in emerging economies understandably aspire and are rapidly gaining access — is the major source of our environmental problems and of much geo-political tension. Modern economies depend upon increasing consumer demand to drive economic growth — and that growth requires the use of more energy and resources, which, in turn, leads to more climate-changing carbon use and more tension-building competition for scarce resources. It seems that our present way of life is simply not tenable indefinitely. Buddhists can demonstrate a genuinely alternative way of life that lives lightly on the planet and that is more truly satisfying than the deliberately stimulated discontent that is the fundamental basis of our present system.

Despite much in the world today that is problematic for the leading of a Buddhist way of life, it also has advantages that can be exploited in the creation of new Buddhist institutions. The greater flexibility and freedom to be found in many societies today offers new opportunities. Traditionally, Buddhists have only had two options: lay life or becoming a Monk or Nun. Now, for many people, there is a wider range of possibilities.

It is important that those who are able to lead a monastic life in an authentic way are encouraged and assisted to do so. Nonetheless, there are some, perhaps many, who would like to dedicate themselves full time to a Buddhist way life, but who cannot observe *brahmacharya* without undue strain or the hypocrisy so common in present monastic Sanghas. For most in that position today, there is no option but to marry, because of prevailing conventions in their societies, yet marriage in such circumstances usually restricts Dharma practice, to a greater or lesser extent. However, it is now possible in some areas of the world to live a “semi-renunciant” lifestyle, applying the five principles mentioned above much more fully than can be done in a family, yet not as fully as a Monk or Nun. Whether this is feasible or not depends on prevailing social conventions and economic conditions, but in many countries today, it is possible, for instance, to live

a community life, without being celibate. It is certainly possible for Buddhists to work together. And a new kind of social life can be created, in which even families work very differently from the current norms.

It is especially important now to find alternative living situations, because of the decay of the traditional family in many cultures and the growth of increasingly isolated family units, which have less and less connection with their neighbors. This “nuclear family” set-up is often unhealthy for all concerned. Urban life for many all over the world is now often lonely and socially fragmented. These conditions are especially unsuitable for those trying to lead a Buddhist way of life, who need the warmth, support, encouragement, and stimulation of fellow Dharma-practitioners and opportunities for developing deep spiritual friendship. Modern Buddhism can explore different ways for people to live together: for instance, as already mentioned, semi-monastic residential communities for those who are unmarried but do not wish to take up the practice of *brahmacharya* — whether they might do so at some later stage or not. For obvious reasons, these often work best if they are for men and women separately. There is also the possibility of residential communities for those with families — although, for practical reasons, these are usually more difficult to establish.

One of the most important areas that a modern Buddhism needs to address is economic life. Most people spend a large proportion of their lives in paid employment, often in unpleasant, boring, or stressful activity. Furthermore, their work often has no connection with their Dharma life and may even compromise their ethical principles. New business institutions need to be formed that enable committed Buddhists to transform their working lives into spiritual practice.

There are a number of principles to be taken into account in establishing such businesses:

- Right Livelihood: Whatever activity is undertaken should not breach the ethical precepts and principles laid down by the Buddha in the Noble Eightfold Path;
- Dāna (“giving”): The work done should make a genuine contribution to the world, whether by fulfilling some basic need, helping to relieve

suffering, or making a financial surplus that can be used to spread the Dharma;

- Creativity: As far as possible, the work should be fulfilling for those who engage in it, both for the ends that it serves and for its own sake;
- Community: All working for the enterprise should collectively constitute a Sangha at work, in which everyone shares a common spiritual perspective and practice;
- Spiritual practice: There should be an effort to transform the work itself into a means of practicing the Dharma, promoting mindfulness, emotional positivity, inspiration, and insight into the nature of things, as well as a sense of self-transcending service.

Every Buddhist should aim to fulfill as many of these principles as possible in their own working lives.

Modern Buddhism needs to offer an alternative cultural and social life. The books we read, the films we watch, and the music we listen to all have an effect on our attitudes and understanding. Culture shapes consciousness very powerfully. As we have seen, culture can be a medium for Dharma practice, and, at the least, can greatly support it. Modern civilization makes entertainment and distraction available with astonishing ease at a very low cost to a very large proportion of the population. Even very poor people have relatively easy access to multi-channel television and the latest popular songs. Most of what is on offer is of no great cultural worth and, indeed, often communicates the worst of consumerism and the most ignoble of values.

Within most countries, more worthwhile culture is available for those who seek it, but a new Buddhism needs to make it easily accessible and to relate it to a Buddhist way of life. This should be one of the functions of Dharma centers; the primary purpose of such centers is teaching and practicing Buddhism, but they need also to serve a social and cultural function. Those trying to follow the Path need opportunities for gathering with those who share their commitment. And they need opportunities for cultural experience other than the mere entertainment or distraction that fills so much of the media. These Dharma centers should offer access to films, plays, poetry, music, and visual art that communicate the Dharma's

truths. They should help to educate the aesthetic sensibility of their members, so that they are better able to appreciate artistic experiences of a kind that reveals more of the real nature of things.

One of the most challenging cultural issues facing Buddhists today is the power of modern technology and its influence on human experience. The technology we use has a strong effect on consciousness in various ways, and this needs to be confronted and explored. Modern Buddhism needs to offer guidance on how to live with technology, taking advantage of its benefits and avoiding its harmful effects. At the same time, modern Buddhism needs to use the modern media to get its message across. There is no inherent reason why film, television, radio, and the internet cannot communicate the Dharma. Indeed, the way new communication technology has developed generally makes it easier and cheaper to use. Buddhists can have a very wide effect if they capture as much space as they can in the new media with items that are well presented, engaging, and genuinely inspiring.

Modern Buddhism needs to confront the modern world as it is, with intelligence and resourcefulness. This involves using opportunities that arise in contemporary circumstances to develop a complete way of life based on the Dharma that is a genuine alternative to consumer society. That way of life requires the support of a range of institutions such as communities, Right Livelihood businesses, and Dharma centers that, together, constitute a new kind of society, in the midst of the wider society — the nucleus of a new society worldwide. This has three functions:

1. Providing resources for those already committed to the Dharma to make further progress on the path;
2. Creating bases for spreading the Dharma much more widely throughout the world;
3. Demonstrating alternatives to consumer society that can model what the whole world could become.

In the world today, these Buddhist societies within the wider society could be seen as replicating the function performed by monasteries in many traditional Buddhist cultures. They would provide rallying points and points of departure:

oases where all may find refreshment and bases from which the entire desert may be made to bloom.

### Transforming the World

The ultimate aspiration of the Sangha is to turn society everywhere into a new society: to transform the whole world into the land of the Dharma — into a “Pure Land”. Impossibly distant, even quixotic, as that goal may seem, Buddhists should not rest until it is achieved — traditionally, it is said that many have devoted themselves to this task, even lifetime after lifetime, and there is no reason why Buddhists today should not have that same perspective. In more immediate and practical terms, this means that, once the environments have been established that support the lives and Dharma practice of the committed core, every effort should be given to transforming the surrounding society. This requires us to address very directly the situation all around, actively seeking to change it for the better on the basis of the Dharma.

The first duty in this respect is to make the Dharma available in as clear and accessible a form as possible and as widely as possible. We need especially to be appealing to all those who feel some urge for a more meaningful life. Many people feel deep disquiet because they lack answers to fundamental questions about life. Many are no longer convinced by the solutions offered by the religions they have grown up with. Many are disillusioned by lives lived merely to meet the expectations of social conventions. However, they lack guidance and encouragement to give their lives to something more fulfilling. The Dharma can feed their hunger, and the Sangha can support them in their struggles for a better life. We need to be actively reaching out to as many such people as possible.

If a large number of people do lead a Buddhist way of life to any extent, this will have a very big effect on society as a whole. However, it is not enough to await that day. At this moment, many suffer terribly, through injustice, violence, poverty, exclusion, and prejudice. It is our compassionate duty to help them escape their suffering now. This can be done in two ways: by giving them the direct

material aid they need to meet their difficulties and by helping them to help themselves in the future. Buddhists can do both.

We have before us an important example of the power of the Dharma to transform the lives of the severely disadvantaged. In 1956, millions of Indian “Dalits” — oppressed people from the lowest castes — converted to Buddhism, under the leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, to escape the stigma of “untouchability”, to which they had been condemned under the Hindu caste system. In the ensuing half century, they have very substantially changed their status because of the courage and confidence that the Dharma has given them.

Poverty and oppression very often leave people feeling passive and fatalistic, especially when they are taught that acceptance is their religious duty, as, for instance, those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy in India. The most basic message of the Dharma is that we are each responsible for our own future. Of course, we cannot be held accountable for being born into poverty or being the target of other people’s prejudice, but we can determine how we respond to our situation and how we escape our disadvantages. The Dharma adamantly rejects doctrines of social inequality. One human being is not better than another simply because he or she is born into a wealthier or more powerful class, caste, or race. What makes one human being better than another is their moral worth, not their birth.

The message of the Dharma gives an immediate sense of confidence and of moral self-reliance, without promoting violence or disharmony. This has a very great impact. It gives people the courage to lift themselves out of deprivation and oppression through their own efforts, just as Dr. Ambedkar’s followers have done since their conversion — which is much more effective in the long term than being dependent upon others for help. This message needs to be heard far more widely by those many people all over the world who are excluded from the benefits of the societies in which they live.

The Dharma can help those who are downtrodden to lift themselves up, but Buddhists also need to address the system in which some are forced to suffer at the hands of others. Modern Buddhism needs to recognize the nature of society and its own role within it. Society is sustained not

so much by the system by which it is governed or the framework of law by which order is kept — although these have a very significant effect. Even a good constitution and good laws can be corrupted by a bad society. It is the values shared by the majority of citizens, and especially the most influential ones, that are the real determiners of the worth of a society. A just and free society arises because citizens generally value justice and freedom and will themselves act on that basis without the coercion of the law.

Values such as freedom and justice are themselves underlain by more fundamental views about the nature and meaning of human life and of our relationship to one another. The way we understand life determines our values, and that is what guides our behavior. The view of the greatest number will determine the values that generally prevail and the social relations that will result. The task of Buddhists is to promote the Dharmic view of life and the values that flow from it. We can try to inject the Dharmic understanding of the way life really is into the public discussion. We can communicate as widely as possible that actions have consequences in accordance with their skillful or unskillful nature. The law of *karma* simply describes what happens: it is the moral law that describes how our own actions affect us in the future, just as the law of gravity describes what happens to a stone when it is dropped. For Buddhists, morality is part of the way things are. We need to communicate that perspective as widely as possible.

We also need to communicate that human beings are capable of spiritual growth and that that growth consists essentially in self-transcendence. Such growth for a human being is as essential as it is for a plant — by which it follows that lack of growth is unnatural and will have detrimental consequences. We grow in accordance with certain laws implicit in the way things are. Our human growth obeys the principle of conditionality: the Path itself is governed by laws. We need simply to apply the laws of growth to our own lives. We will then find ourselves experiencing greater and greater happiness and fulfillment.

The ultimate meaning and purpose of human society is the growth of the individuals within it — growth in creativity, love, compassion, and

wisdom. If that growth is taking place among large numbers of people, society will be stable because basic human values will be widely shared, moderating competing interests.

If Buddhist values are spread more widely, they can easily make their influence strongly felt within societies all over the world, thus promoting the well-being of all. This requires that Buddhists have a voice within politics, the media, and the arts. Buddhism can promote values of tolerance and equality, ensuring that no one suffers unnecessarily for the accidents of their birth: race, color, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical disability, or any other arbitrary characteristic. It can promote peace and harmony and a spirit of friendliness and cooperation throughout society. And it can promote culture, learning, and the arts as means to a higher human life.

Buddhism has traditionally worked within whatever political and social system it has found itself, having started in the prosperous monarchies of the Ganges plain. But it can embrace modern democracy wholeheartedly, because democracy, at its best, is founded upon the same values that Buddhism advocates: respect for every individual regardless of birth, individual freedom and moral responsibility, and social harmony. What is more, the modern world needs the Dharma very urgently.

If democracy is to be something more than merely an arena of competing self-interests, it needs a shared set of ideals.

The world is increasingly pluralistic, and it is less and less possible to found nations on racial or historical-cultural ideologies. There needs to be a larger vision of human existence that animates the democratic process: a vision of the common good in terms that are more than merely material. This the Dharma offers supremely, and it does it basing itself not on belief in revelation or authority, but on an analysis of the nature of life that is accessible to reason and that can be confirmed by experience. ■

Adapted from *A Buddhist Manifesto: The Principles of the Triratna Buddhist Community* (2012) by Dharmachari Subhuti (Alex Kennedy). The Sanskrit terms used in the original have been left as such and have not been converted into their Pāli equivalents.